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THE MAKING OF
**THE
DARK
CRYSTAL**

Paris
Film
Festival

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**CLASS
OF 1984**



THE DARK CRYSTAL 22

ALAN JONES LOOKS AT THE MAKING OF THE
JIM HENSON MULTI-MILLION DOLLAR
ANIMATRONICS SPECTACULAR.

The Dark Crystal

"One of the many unique things about *The Dark Crystal* is the way the concept started," says co-producer/co-director Jim Henson creator of the world renowned Muppets television series. "Everything else I've done started with a script. From that script we would design the characters. *The Dark Crystal* started with an idea to create a fantasy world and environment first and let the story evolve later." Henson first had the idea to do a serious fantasy film using advanced Muppet technology when his team did a few segments for television's *Saturday Night Live* which utilised a series of creatures that were scaly but humorous. "It wasn't terribly successful," says Henson, "But I personally thought the creatures themselves were very nice as they had a life that was totally different to anything we'd attempted up to that time, dictated mainly by the very nature of the show." A conversation with one of the daughters, who wanted to see him create a fantasy world with a classic Good vs Evil quest, made the project gel a bit more, further fuelled by Henson's ideas concerning terribly gruesome cocktail parties with reptilian

creatures dressed in fine clothes maintaining sophisticated levels of conversation. "Then I saw Brian Froud's work. A couple of people from my New York workshop showed me some of his illustrations and I thought they were gorgeous. I felt they were immediately translateable in filmic terms for my purpose." The basic storyline for *The Dark Crystal* was finally talked down over a period of two days while Henson and another of his daughters were snowbound at a Howard Johnson's motel while waiting for a flight to England. Writer David Odell was brought in to doctor the script and the project was presented to Lord Grade after the first Muppet movie had become a blockbuster success. It remains to be seen whether *The Dark Crystal* will be the money-spinning swan song from the former tycoon at ITC everyone expects. Both Henson and co-producer Gary Kurtz say that Lord Grade's now legendary financial problems after the flop of *Raise the Titanic* did not hurt their production at all. Says Kurtz, "We had a contract with them. They fulfilled it. We were all aware of what was going on and now their major concern is to release it at a time when they will be more likely to see the biggest



return." Hence the postponement of the Spring opening to one a whole year later.

Gary Kurtz joined the production after he had gone to the Henson Organization for help with the Yoda character in *The Empire Strikes Back*. "They had been working on *The Dark Crystal* for some time and they showed me their tests on some of the creatures they had developed and I found it all very interesting," says Kurtz. So much so that he offered them the expertise he had accrued working on large budgeted special effect pictures. And in a film that for everyone involved was just one large special effect from start to finish, Henson asked him to co-produce. Kurtz not only brought his knowledge of special effects to the production but a knowledge of basic film-making. "Both Jim and co-director Frank Oz had a limited background in that area so I helped a lot as a sounding board for their ideas. That was my main job – to assist the directors into getting the film they wanted." The Muppet connotation is one that Kurtz wants to avoid at all costs in connection with *The Dark Crystal*. "Of course we can't ignore the fact that *The Dark Crystal's* roots are firmly planted in over twenty years of refining

the Muppets – Jim's entire career is based on that – but we don't want the audience making a mistake that it's just like them. The Muppets succeeded because of the goofy character design and clever writing. In *The Dark Crystal* we couldn't rely on the strength of the personalities per se to overcome their physical limitations. We tried to develop a group of characters that could be as realistic as possible in a variety of different ways. It is a synthesis of everything learnt via Yoda and The Muppets but we hope once people start watching the film, they will accept the creatures as real within the fantasy context and forget all about the technique. The film will not work if you are constantly thinking, 'How did they do that?'"

The story of *The Dark Crystal* is pretty much a standard quest saga in the richly landscaped Tolkeinian tradition. It is set in a land unplaced in time and space dominated by an evil breed called the Skeksis. Once a tribe of exalted thinkers ruled the land from a castle in which a great Crystal glowed with the power garnered from the world's three suns. The Skeksis took over when the Crystal cracked and darkened heralding their



degenerate reign. As greed, corruption and decay become the predominant factors in the Skeksis rule, the Crystal becomes the decadent key to their power. The film opens when a mighty astronomical occurrence is about to commence which, if allowed to proceed uninterrupted, will see the Skeksis in power for eternity. There is only one thing the Skeksis fear and that is an ancient prophecy which states that one of the Gelfling race will somehow destroy them. In an effort to protect their dynasty, the Skeksis have tried to eradicate the Gelfling race but unknown to them, Jen has been saved from the monstrous Garthim's claws and had been raised by a clan of Mystics. They see Jen as their salvation for discovering the secret of the Dark Crystal and restoring light and balance to their world.

According to Kurtz, it is unfair to categorise *The Dark Crystal* as a medieval fantasy. "That isn't accurate as we have used the criteria of another world without earthly ties to time and space. It's just that, unlike a lot of science-fiction design which is abstractly interesting but not very practical in terms of a believable environment for the characters to exist in,





The Dark Crystal has an alien technology that you do feel has been developed and made consistent. Primitive is a more apt word and one that I would favour."

When Jim Henson arranged a meeting for himself and Brian Froud, whose books *The Land of Froud* and *Faeries* were destined to become best-sellers, Froud found himself totally won over by Henson's obvious enthusiasm for the project. "He outlined the story in very vague terms but engendered so much enthusiasm that I decided I wanted to be involved. I did a few rough sketches of what I thought the Skeksis would look like and then I was asked to go to New York to work with the primary core of people on the project. We would have these wonderful meetings where we would sit around throwing ideas about and I would be doodling and coming up with visuals that Jim would constantly be looking at and making suggestions about. After all the changes we would arrive at something we both felt happy about. That was the easy part, getting the basic look, the problem was translating my intricate thumbnail sketches into characters that could move. All the manipulative and ►



mechanical problems meant constant design changes as we went along, but it was my job to make sure that nothing got too far away from our original feel and conception. I hadn't worked with the Muppet people before so I didn't know the tricks of the trade at first. It was like a conjuring trick because my designs had to incorporate ways of hiding things to give the surface reality the illusion that these creatures actually had the ability to move."

Because of the complex mechanics involved in all the creatures for *The Dark Crystal*, the actual filming was a logistical nightmare. With three or four people operating each character with six or seven creatures required for each shot, the enormous problems involved become apparent. For this reason a lot of the film's high production cost centred on the lengthy rehearsal time needed to make sure everyone knew exactly what they were doing and the sheer difficulty of filming on the studio floor where everybody had to be hidden under the floor and crouched out of camera range. Add to this the isolation closed circuit television sets the puppeteers needed in order to see how their creatures were translating on a

Panavision screen, which makes directors Jim Henson and Frank Oz's decision to move the camera at any excuse a justifiable one. Jim Henson: "As the puppets were so limited, incredibly so, I had to make the film move as they inherently couldn't. It was because of this reason too that the editing was not dictated by where we wanted to cut but the only place we could do so." Despite all these problems Henson has come to accept that no matter how hard *The Dark Crystal* was to make, no one would ever properly appreciate it. "But that's always been true of everything we've ever done and in a way people shouldn't realise because what it all boils down to is telling the story. Somebody once suggested we should publicise this film as the most fantastic puppet movie ever made but we couldn't possibly as the whole idea has such a negative connotation. The art of *The Dark Crystal* lies in puppetry of course but you could never ever say that."

Henson felt he needed a co-director and talked Frank Oz into it quite late in the production's genesis. "I wanted him to help me because I knew I would be doing a certain amount of performing and I really needed



someone outside whose judgement I trusted implicitly. Frank and I have always worked closely together and we have a clean rapport. Then as a couple of characters began developing like the female astronomer, Aughra, and the Skeksis chamberlain, I knew they would be perfect for Frank, so I talked him into that as well."

For Frank Oz directing a motion picture was a lot of fun but he found it frustrating to have the dual role of being at the helm and also being the characters. "When I was in whatever character, I wanted to be outside thinking about a shot, and vice-versa. It is very disconcerting to be thinking about lighting when you should really be channelling your energy into the manipulation of your puppet. Looking back though, that frustration definitely helped the film. We would communicate through a complicated network of ear and mouthpieces so we could relay instructions to whoever, but no matter how daunted I felt by all the complexity, I always got a surge of excitement the moment I got on the studio floor."

Everyone admits that *The Dark Crystal* could have been an ultimately easier film to make if animation or live-action had been included but as Gary Kurtz says, "This is exactly what we wanted to stay away from because the creatures are definitely more real by not using humans in elaborate make-up. We did do some tests in this area but none of us could deny that it took the edge off the fantasy aspect. Doing that would have eliminated certain problems but it just wasn't convincing enough for us and the same applies to stop-motion animation as I'm not convinced that it would have been easier in the long run mainly because of the cost of optical composition. These were decisions not based on economics though but the overall philosophy behind the film. We wanted to use techniques that were familiar to the concept and not have loads of opticals that would have been restricting on set and would have needed storyboards."

At a budgetary cost of over 30 million dollars, plus the interest accruing to postpone the opening date, is *The Dark Crystal* the costliest fantasy film ever made? Gary Kurtz: "That could be a fair assessment if you don't classify *Superman* or *The Empire Strikes Back* as fantasy but it certainly is unique. How it fits into the market place we will just have to see. Anytime you do something out of the ordinary you risk not being accepted. No one wanted to make *Star Wars* because supposedly at that time science-fiction wasn't popular. If you are continually worried about the audience you aren't going to get anywhere."

So is *The Dark Crystal* going to be fantasy's *Heaven's Gate* or a bold new stride forward it defining what we will want to see on our screens in future years? The choice is yours.